

Nigeria shut down at start of indefinite general strike

Nigeria has been gripped by widespread anger and protest since the sudden New Year's Day announcement of a more than doubling in the price of fuel; something which hits not just transport of people and goods but also fuel for the generators people need for electricity and fuel for cooking.

The government says that the \$8 billion dollars "saved" by this will be used for investment. But hardly anyone believes this. Even the Financial Times, a supporter of cutting the 'subsidy', was forced to say that the government "failed" to convince Nigerians "where the savings will actually go".

Immediately this is a drastic cut in living standards. Again the Financial Times had to recognise this, saying: "Nigerians are justifiably angry (as) the pump price of petrol has more than doubled, transport costs have soared and food prices jumped. For tens of millions of Nigerians living on the edge this represents a hardship too far."

Spontaneous protests began immediately. Many workers simply could not afford to travel to work anymore. Under immense pressure, but with little preparation, Nigeria's two trade union centres, the NLC and TUC, called an indefinite general strike from 9 January which be-



Part of the mass demonstration in Lagos photo DSM

gan with huge support and quickly brought the "country to a halt", reported the BBC.

The Socialist Party's sister organisation in Nigeria, the Democratic Socialist movement (DSM), has been heavily involved in the protests (see reports on the DSM website - www.socialistnigeria.org) working to build the strike and help develop demo-

cratic strike committees in workplaces and communities.

This is the seventh national general strike in Nigeria since June 2000. Previous strikes were also well supported but did not result in any sizeable gain for working people. This is why the DSM is also arguing the workers' movement needs a strategy not just to defeat the fuel price

rise, but to replace the current capitalist government with a workers' and poor people's government that can break with capitalism and start to use the country's resources in the interests of working people.

Below is part of the DSM's report of the first day of strike action and proposals for the next steps

On Monday 9 January 2012, tens of thousands of Nigerians marched through the streets of Lagos [the commercial capital] in a demonstration against the removal of fuel subsidy by the Nigerian government. As a result of this policy, the price of petroleum has shot up from N65 to between N140 to N200. The cost of food, transport and basic services has also soared.

Meanwhile salaries remain fixed and the N18,000 national minimum wage remains unpaid in a lot of states. It is against this background that the huge burst of anger of working and poor people can be understood.

As early as 5am, tens of people could be seen gathered around bus stops in Lagos and across the country. Bonfires and barricades announced to people in the community that the mass revolt had started.

It was the biggest and most widespread movement in Nigeria and in particular in Lagos since the return to civil rule.

Major and even community roads were deserted. Shops, markets and offices were closed. The ubiquitous danfo buses were on holiday, so also were the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) buses which attempted to break the Joint Action Front (JAF) protest on 3 January. On most roads inside the communities, young people could be seen playing football.

Unlike other mass protests in which trade unionists and activists exert effort to build barricades to enforce the directives of the strike, in this case the masses came out on their own to junctions and barricade points.

At Agbotikuyo bus stop for instance where DSM comrades played prominent roles, efforts by the police to break the barricade were frustrated when the mass of people came out. About 1,000 marched from this bus stop. By the time the march got to Iyana-Ipaja along the Lagos-Abeokuta expressway the number of protesters had grown to 3,000.

Also in the Ijaye area of Lagos, as soon as the members and leaders of the Joint Action Front arrived at the bus-stop, the protest began. Lanre Arogundade, a member of the Democratic Socialist Movement, addressed the crowd. He explained the economic implications of the anti-poor policy and called on on-lookers to join the demonstration. This was followed by the chanting of anti-government songs, distribution of flyers and a display of placards carrying different messages.

A particular song became the anthem of the protest, "Jonathan ole PDP ole", a Yoruba song meaning "Jonathan (the president) is a thief, PDP (the ruling party) is a thief".

A leaflet produced by the DSM condemned the present economic system and called for its replacement with an alternative socialist system based upon the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy to allow the democratic control and planning of the use of the country's resources in the interests of the majority.

Repression

One young man, identified as Aderinola Ademola, was shot dead by a trigger-happy policeman while three others were injured and are presently recuperating in a private hospital.

There is the need for a campaign against this brutality on protesters. This becomes more important given the vicious police brutality in other places like Kano where at least one protester was also reportedly shot dead today. There are reports of other dead from around the country. In Enugu state, Governor Chime issued a decree banning all public protests.

In Lagos the protest train later converged at the Gani Fawehinmi Park, Ojota, where several union leaders, human right activists, entertainers and clergymen addressed the protesters.

The DSM is calling for the building of democratic mass action com-

mittees in communities, workplaces and campuses to act as the platform to involve more people in the struggle. We are also calling for a consistent struggle against this attack and other anti-poor policies. While noting the correctness of the demand for immediate reversal of pump price of fuel to N65 per litre, we argue that even this is not enough.

While the 1 January removal of fuel subsidy acted as a spark, the real basis of peoples' anger is the anti-poor and neoliberal attacks of the last decade and more.

Youth unemployment is a frightening 42% (over 28 million). Education and health is commercialised, road networks and public electricity have virtually collapsed. For many, especially the youth, the future is bleak under the ferociously anti-poor policies of capitalism.

This is why our slogan is: "Down with Jonathan's anti-poor government, for a workers and poor people's government".

We believe that to ensure total liberation from this miserable life, where just 1% corner over 80% of society's resources, there is the need

for a revolution to chase out the government of capitalist looters and put in their place a workers' and poor people's government that can run society in the interests of the millions and not the millionaires.

Part of this struggle is the building of a mass workers' party armed with socialist programmes and policies of public ownership of the oil sector and the economy under the democratic control and management of the working masses.

Such is the power of the current strike that it is possible that the government may offer concessions, but we have seen before temporary concessions being used by the ruling class to buy time for themselves by damping down the struggle.

Jonathan and Co hope to be able to sit this struggle out. This is why it is essential that labour continues to go on the offensive. This capitalist society is going nowhere, it is at a dead-end. Labour must use this moment to build its own alternative that can sweep away the thieving gangs that loot this country and the capitalist system that has proved incapable of developing the nation."



photo DSM

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated.

The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

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